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ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 22A

SAN ANTONIO LIGHT (TX)
4 APRIL 1982

Fewer secrets?

CIA downplaying cloak-dagger image

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The Central Intelligence Agency is trying to downplay its public cloak and dagger image by expanding public relations efforts, an agency official has told The Light.

The limited move to de-mystify the government agency most synonymous with "top secret" is the product of a new understanding in the intelligence community that a response is needed to the sophisticated propaganda machines of other countries, the official said.

"I think we're competing for people's minds," said J. William Doswell, director of the CIA's office of external affairs.

Doswell said the 4-year-old office he joined last July has become more willing to provide reporters with unclassified information, and, in some cases, other information as background.

Doswell met with a group of Light officials in the Light's offices. He was in San Antonio to address a 41-person gathering of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers.

The 55-year-old Virginia native said, CIA Director William Casey at first told him, "We're going to be a no-profile agency, not a low-profile agency," but has come to believe that some public forays are desirable to make known the views of the intelligence community.

Toward that end, CIA officials have held periodic breakfast meetings with reporters in Washington, have introduced themselves to news editors around the country and have delivered speeches on intelligence matters.

"We just don't comment on certain things, for example sources of information and methods of operation."

"We will say 'no comment.' We won't tell the first lie."

Doswell also noted CIA efforts to have the Freedom of Information Act tightened to exempt the agency from most or all requests for information.

He said two of the "regular customers" under the act are the KGB (Soviet intelligence) and Tass (the Soviet news agency).

"We have to provide the information to them. That's a little incongruous to me."

But Doswell recognized that newspapers and the public can have legitimate needs for certain information.

He said the CIA is working with a newspaper publishers group to attempt to arrive at a "reasonable" position on Freedom of Information Act disclosures.

Doswell said public perception of the CIA as a "spook business" is exaggerated.

Fewer than one in 90 employees of the agency could be considered spies in the popular sense of the word, he said.

Most employees in the 35-year-old agency are simply gatherers of information, he said.

They perform research on such seemingly innocuous topics as the debt structure of Soviet bloc countries and different nations' grain-growing capabilities or public power sources, he said.

But, he said, that information can pack a wallop when it comes time to formulate foreign policy.



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